# Comics and Authorship: An Introduction

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## The Monkey Business of Authorship in Popular Media

During a 2011 photography expedition in Indonesia, British nature photographer David Slater sought the attention of a group of curious crested black macaques. Left alone with the picture-ready camera equipment, one (or more) of the monkeys did exactly what every human being does nowadays with a camera: it took a selfie and did not stop at just one (Slater 2016b). The authorship of this viral photo became, as is often the case with the authorship of successful, profitable works, a legal concern and eventually the PETA stepped in on the monkey's behalf to claim its right to copyright (a right that is so far not extended to animals). Slater and PETA reached an agreement only this September with one of the clauses including donating a percentage of the earnings from the images for the protection of the monkeys and their habitat (Cascone 2017; Associated Press 2017). While this news item in itself captures all that is contentious in authorship and the amorphous entity of the author (was the author Slater who set up the equipment, established a relationship of trust with the macaques and encouraged them to use the camera or was it the monkey who made faces at the camera and pressed the right button?), the commonplace assumption that the photos were taken by the male Naruto rather than (presumably) the female Ella, is no less revealing about the trickiness of attributing authorship to one entity as well as the gendered dynamics and biases embedded in authorship whereby the author remains quintessentially male.

Indeed it is the figure of the singular author, and not a more holistic understanding of a potentially composite, fluid and fragmentary authorship, that reigns over the popular imagination, reinforced by both marketing strategies and critical discourses. This also holds true for comics (Jameel 2016, 183) and is reflected in the many heated battles over copyrights raising questions regarding an author's moral rights and the recognition of their creative role (Gordon 2013). Underlying this is the bleak reality that

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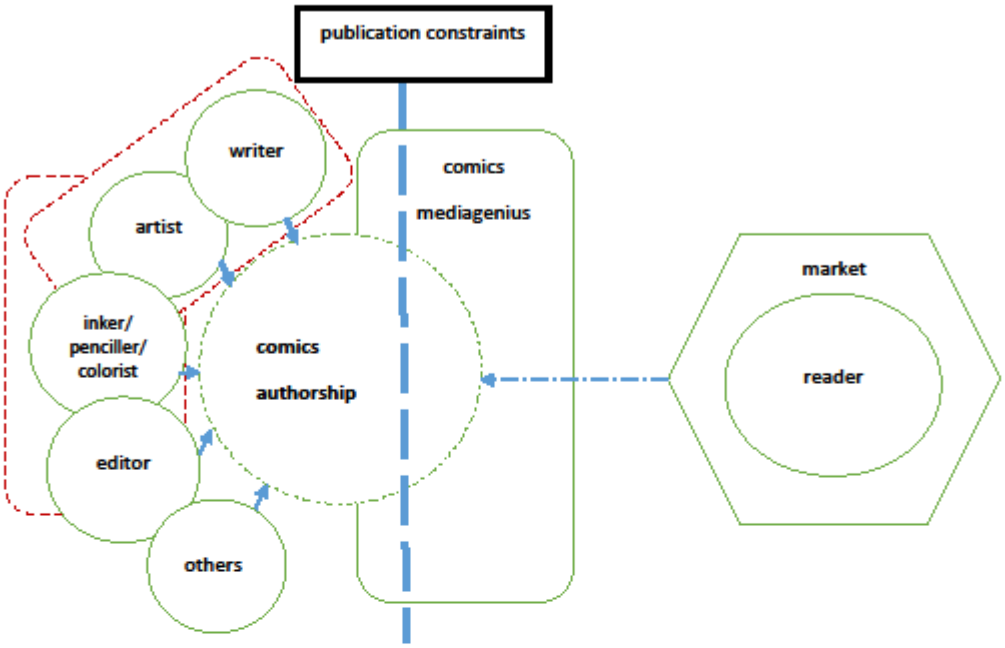
"characters and stories are more permanent than creative teams" in the world of comics and popular media in general (Carpenter 2009, 27): in the case of franchised creations, individuals rarely win from corporations and extensive marketing and networking efforts are necessary for the recognition of non-commercial cultural products. Consider, for instance, Benjamin Woo's study which, while not lending itself to easy generalizations, shows that an average of one tenth of the surveyed creators' revenues in the context of Anglophone comics were actually "derived directly from creative work in comics" (Woo 2016, 191).

Although, as we will see below and throughout this issue, the 'graphic novel' does offer an unprecedented platform for the legitimization of individual creators or writer-artist duos, this recognition and acclaim does not seem to extend to the many other hands involved in the making of comics, ranging from inkers and colorists (cf. Brienza and Johnston 2016, 1-2) to editors themselves as Keith Friedlander suggests (Friedlander 2017). Studying the case of Vertigo editor Karen Berger, Friedlander emphasizes her role in providing not only creative impetus but also in ensuring an encouraging, advantageous environment for comics creators while simultaneously fulfilling a social function in setting the tone for the reception of their works. "In order to accurately understand the multifarious labour the editor performs in this role," Friedlander concludes, "the researcher must study their entire network of working relationships" (Friedlander 2013, 14). A network of relational and often undeterminable actions and influences is indeed how comics authorship is used in this introduction, as illustrated through the diagram below:



The diagram identifies the creative forces (on the left) and influences (on the right) feeding into comics authorship through its porous boundaries. I have only included the most obvious creative forces, such as writer, artist (also known as illustrator, and nowadays more rarely as cartoonist), editor, inker. I have also added 'others' to highlight how the entities listed are only a selection of those contributing towards 'authoring' comics. Depending on the comic in question, many of these forces are "comics' invisible workers", to whom Casey Brienza and Paddy Johnston dedicate their volume, *Cultures of Comics Work* (Brienza and Johnston 2016, vi).

Furthermore, the diagram also shows how comics authorship is intertwined with the mediagenius of comics (the inextricable intertwining of style and storytelling specific to the medium of comics), which in itself is a concept hinged on relations established during both the production and reception of a comic (Marion 1997; Baetens 2007, 146; Grennan, 163). Moreover, both concepts interact with constraints imposed by the publication and editorial context. Finally, piercing through the medium of comics and influencing its authorship are the market, which is understood as a dense conglomerate of financial and sociopolitical factors, and the readers who, for instance, through letter columns in comics magazines, are both "authors of letters and implied co-authors of future stories" (Stein 2015, 168). This observation can also be extended to fanzines, which started appearing from the 1960s onwards and contributed towards founding a critical discourse around comics (Stein 2015, 177; cf. also Gordon 2013, 226). Comics authorship is, ultimately (and contrary to popular, and at times even scholarly, imagination), ensconced in a complex network of interacting forces and does not lend itself to easy delimitation.

## Author-Auteur-Artist

To return to my opening foray into a soft news item with its longwinded but relatively happy end (Slater can now assert his copyright and the crested black macaques have apparently been saved by their new-found fame since they now attract tourists and are cherished instead of hunted by the locals), comics authorship and monkey authorship share several concerns that are not only part of the concept of authorship itself, but also related to status (of potential authors and the work in question) as well as the murky realm of collaborations and the often muffled role of collaborators, especially in the realm of literature. Michel Lafon and Benoît Peeters, for instance, point out that the word 'collaboration' itself remains a taboo when it comes to the perception of literary creation as well as its criticism (Lafon and Peeter 2006, 7). This tendency has, to a considerable extent, also been inherited by comics.

In other words, both comics and macaque authorships, with all their complications, can shed new light onto the relationships and processes informing authorship while also explaining the resilience of the singular Author (a Romantic, literary heritage) or *auteur* (a concept established, ironically enough, for film, a medium

involving intense regulation, mediation and collaboration [cf. Bazin 1985]). That our perception and study of cultural productions still clings—if unwittingly—to the Author testifies to the extent to which the biases of the 'higher' arts are imposed on the more popular ones when the latter are given the kind of critical attention usually reserved for the former. As Woo confirms, the recognition of the comics creator "is usually as the authorizing figure behind an oeuvre" (Woo 2016b, 191). All three implicitly absolutist constructions of authorship—author, auteur, artist—hail from media that have a very close relationship with comics, respectively literature, cinema and the visual arts. Although such an author-centered framework has benefitted both comics and comics studies in several ways, especially through the rise of the usually single-authored graphic novels, which have facilitated the transposition of literary paradigms to comics and have allowed comics to enter literary discourse, it is time to tackle the issue of authorship and unpack the concerns it brings in its tow in order to better understand the creative practices at work in a popular medium like comics where the stakes and constraints are directly tied to readers' desires and the whims of the market.

Comics, as Scott Bukatman has shown admiringly in *The Poetics of Slumberland* are driven by an exuberant, distinct energy (Bukatman 2012), which is not only limited to comics of the early 20th century but continues, at least to a certain extent, in contemporary comics. This energy is a compound of not only creative inspiration but also the limitations and particularities of the medium, the constraints of publishing and, particularly with reference to serial productions, the influence of readers' opinions and yearnings. And it is this energy, this drive to entertain but also to simply incarnate 'fun' channeled more through characters rather than author (in comics and comics periodicals ranging from the *Beano* and *Spirou* to the DC and Marvel franchises), that makes authorship in comics, I think, a kind of monkey business in two ways: firstly, there is the particularly elusive, amorphous nature of the amalgam that is usually the author in such works (which is accompanied by legal entanglements); secondly, cheekiness remains the core, most well-known business of comics, which also infiltrates, for instance, the more artistic and literary graphic novel. In addition, monkey business can also be connected to the specific slapstick aesthetic that has been extremely influential for comics, as Christian Reyns-Chikuma suggests through drawing a parallel with the Marx brothers' oeuvre which includes a 1931 film called *Monkey Business* (Reyns-Chikuma 2018).

It is perhaps because of these numerous, monkeying tangles that authorship in comics remains a fairly understudied segment of comics studies. This holds true, even now, in the heyday of the graphic novel and personal or personalized stories, which range from reportages to memoirs and the (somewhat) alternative publications by, most famously, Vertigo where, as Isabelle Licari-Guillaume examines in her article in this special issue, the presence of the *auteur* seems to be particularly dominant, both visually and stylistically in many a story, ranging from Alan Moore’s distinctive, poetic language to the similarities between Morpheus's [*The Sandman*] appearance and Neil Gaiman's or between King Mob's [*The Invisibles*] and Grant Morrison's. As Licari-Guillaume nuances,

these authors are presumed to project degrees of wholeness that can be easily deconstructed to various degrees, especially in openly collaborative projects (where the artists and, potentially, some of the 'invisible hands' are mentioned).

However, even before Vertigo, the comics writer has often enjoyed a privileged position in the popular imagination. This can be seen in photographs of duos, as in the case of several pictures of Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel 'at work', in which Shuster, the artist, is usually seated at his drawing board while Siegel, the writer, stands or bends over him. This staging captures the recurrent hierarchization of the relationship between the writer and the artist, according to which the artist is seen essentially as an illustrator of the writer's words. While Shuster and Siegel (and other writer-artist duos) are also pictured in more egalitarian poses and artists such as Jack Kirby and Bob Kane attracted ardent fans (cf. also Daniel Stein's discussion of fan perceptions of Bob Kane [Stein 2015, 162-164]), such democratization is rarely discernible in studio images. Consider, for instance, certain images of Hergé's studio in which the Tintin creator is shown watching over artists hard at work. However, it is also only in such studio photographs that we get to see the usually unnamed, other collaborators who are rarely acknowledged beyond the credit lines or studio photographs and whose relationships to the works remain by and large hidden.

Before elaborating on the kinds of relationships and processes feeding into comics authorship, I would like to turn to one final image of authorship in order to distill the various levels of mediation at work in the specific case of comics 'authors'. This is the cover of a four-page brochure advertising acclaimed *Yellow Kid* and *Buster Brown* creator, R. F. Outcault's "Humorous Lectures",[1] which is described on the opening page as both a lecture and entertainment. It is followed by another page of praise from various newspaper reviews that focuses on his showman, comic qualities as well as his artistic skill. This combination of skills that are essentially entertaining (and become moving or touching for the graphic novel) is crucial towards understanding authorial identity in comics because of its composite nature as well as its dependence on pleasing an audience. Outcault's photograph in the centre of the cover page shows him in a comfortable, self-assured pose and is framed by drawings of the comic children and animals who made him famous. The materiality and realism of the black and white photograph is thus cordoned off from the colored, intensely animated comics characters presenting and commenting on their 'creator' ("He made us all," gushes a small boy from the top right corner). A closer look reveals an unassuming background resembling, through its crosshatched lines, a sheet of notebook or drafting paper and thus also alludes to the mechanical reproducibility of the drawings. The acknowledgment of Outcault's ability to create, to give life to characters—which do indeed live and breathe with their readers through reappearing on a serial basis—is juxtaposed to the announcement of his humorous lectures (the importance and success of which is incarnated through the very presence of the brochure as well as the seriousness and

[1] http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/tc/id/44083/rec/1

realness of the photograph). Herein lies the tension that persists in the construction and perception of comics authors: branded as entertainers entitled to a certain level of recognition, they remain practitioners of a popular, mass-produced art, and are thus framed by the clichés associated with medium of comics, many of which are tied to the nature of comics drawing: the lightness, spontaneity, unpretentiousness and consequent inferiority of such drawing, which can be produced and disseminated quickly and without much ado, diminishes its general artistic and monetary 'value'; moreover, perceived as being inferior to words and serving essentially to illustrate them (even in Outcault's lectures, which are announced as illustrated lectures), the drawing-dominated comic as well as the hands involved in its visualization remain relegated to the lower echelons of the resistant hierarchy of cultural production.

In a recent discussion of the differing statuses accorded to the comics author and the graphic novelist, Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo propose four factors that would need to change in order for someone like

> Jack Kirby to displace Art Spiegelman as the most prestigious figure in comics. First, scholarship and criticism would have to value collaboratively produced works as much as it celebrates the products of single authors. Second, comic books would have to be esteemed principally for their visual qualities—and, moreover, for the distinctive visual vocabulary that they have developed. Third, comic books would have to be respected as a form of popular entertainment, and, particularly, entertainment targeted at children and young people. Fourth, and following on from the previous two premises, processes of valuation would need to be substantially reoriented toward the creation of distinctive, well-known characters, rather than discrete works in which they appear; as corollary, prestige would flow to the originators (or major reinterpreters) of those characters (Beaty and Woo 2016, 46).

In other words, the figure of the canonized literary author or the Romantic creative genius needs to be dismantled in order to fully understand comics creation, which in turn entails understanding the dynamics of two key elements: collaboration and mediation.

## Collaboration and Mediation

Acknowledging that authors are going to persist "so long as the whole system of valuation and selling exists as it does" Ahmed Jameel suggests that "it is important to begin to make sense of authorship in a way that combats the reductivity of auteurism" (Jameel 2016, 183). For this, we have to take account of not only the contexts and subjectivities of comics readers but also those of the various collaborators involved in

the making of the comic, all of which are blurry realms. Media scholars Derek Johnson and Jonathan Grey likewise underscore the importance of taking the overarching media environment into account since "how authorship is mediated, where the technologies and platforms that we use in the course of creativity seem to enable social and collaborative forms of cultural production" (Johnson and Grey 2013, 2). For comics this environment stretches across publication contexts such as comics magazines to the transmedial world of franchises, most of which heavily depend on pleasing their audiences (whence the significance of the medium's 'popular' status).

Jameel emphasizes the interaction of subjectivities that comics are the node of: “[i]f art is to be considered a process, audience participation and criticism are integral parts of a loop comprising the process” (Jameel 2016, 182; cf. also Grennan 2017). Similarly for Gordon "fan knowledge [...] itself is a form of authorship in that fans bring different associations of the characters from multiple versions into play when encountering any particular individual instance of the character" (Gordon 2013, 223). Jameel concludes that “authorship is only relevant if it is relevant to the way a viewer or reader chooses to look. A whole sea of subjectivity” (Jameel 2016, 183). Simon Grennan likewise emphasizes the intersubjectivity of drawing while also drawing more attention to the bodiliness of both drawing and reading practices (2017). Collaboration and mediation (through the medium of comics in general but also its individual components and devices) are thus inextricable components of comics authorship.

Hence, besides "the melding of fact and fiction" or "the incongruence between the real and the cartoon" which Nancy Pedri discerns in graphic memoirs and which is tied to the very elements of comics drawing (Pedri 2015, 148), there is, as Tom Hart's litany of 'authors' of *Rosalie Lightning* suggests, a range of other people and their affective impact that goes into the creation of a work:

> By Tom Hart
> and Rosalie Lightning
> and Leela Corman
> and the residents of New York City,
> Gainesville, Florida, New Mexico,
> and Hawaii, as well as
> various singer-songwriters,
> film directors, actors, animators,
> comic artists, donors, lovers,
> and friends" (Hart 2016, 7).

However, authorship is also more, as the discussion of author photographs and the diagram suggest: it is a carefully crafted persona through paratexts but also by the author himself. Jérôme Meizoz, for instance, uses the term 'posture' to describe the author's construction of themselves, the conscious choices they make in presenting themselves as particular, distinct entities (Meizoz 2012, 28). Enacting the tension that

persists in authorial and artistic figurations (often imposed rather than self-constructed) in the comics world., Rousseau, one of the authors studied by Meizoz, shuffled between the persona of a genius writer and a copier of music or a "modest and independent artisan" paid by the page.

Romantic inclinations persist in comics not only through the dominant *concept* of the author but also through the reverent aura attached to the (assumed) *presence* of the author. This can be traced back to the establishment of lithography as the preferred technique of reproduction in the 19th century with the main attractive feature being that lithographs were direct reproductions retaining the trace of the artist's hand (Mainardi 2017, 17). Philippe Marion's graphic trace (*trace graphique*) dialogues with the transmission of this presence of the *graphiateur*, conceptualized as the graphically present—and represented—narrator of the story rather than the author themselves. Just like for Jameel and Grennan (who builds on the significance of intersubjectivity in comics through Marion's concepts of media genius and trace [cf. Grennan 2017, 161-172]), the graphic trace mediates the relationship, or the point of contact between the artist and the reader.

For Jared Gardner the drawn line makes comics stand out because, from "all of the narrative arts born at the end of the nineteenth century, the sequential comic has not effaced the line of the artist, the handprint of the storyteller" (Gardner 2011, 56). Drawing, as Gardner suggests, also necessitates a rethinking of the functioning of comics and our ways of analyzing them. However, while Marion's graphiation risks encouraging the assumption of a singular authorial presence as Jan Baetens points out (Baetens 2007, 151), it does blur the contours of the author through taking into account the reader's engagement with, and flexible interpretations of, a comic. This conception of the trace as a result of a laborious and potentially collaborative enterprise is suggested by Philippe Marion and André Gaudreault's interpretation of the clear line as being an outcome of "graphic drudgery" (Gaudreault and Marion quoted in Gardner 2011, 65). It is also echoed by Gardner's conclusion that "physical labor of storytelling is always visible in graphic narrative" (ibid.).

Besides mediation by the trace, there is a final layer of mediation unfolding through the gamut of influences exerted within a specific medium or genre as Geoff Klock has suggested through examining the anxiety of influence in superhero comics (Klock 2006; for the transnational travels of superhero stories see Stein 2014). In focusing on serial superhero comics, Daniel Stein suggests that they are active mediators in Bruno Latour's understanding of the word (Stein 2015, 157). This mediation is activated through both the readers' involvement as well as superhero comic's self-conscious tendency of raising the question of authorship and authority through their serial essence (ibid., 159). However, even in non-serial comics or graphic novels by one author, authorship is rendered questionable through their awareness of medium-specific influences, as well as transmedial and transcultural ones. This is reflected in Tom Hart's "Acknowledgements" section in *Rosalie Lightning* which includes several inspirational creators, performers, scholars (and still others) ranging from "Hayao

Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli, Roland Barthes, Jack Davis, Johnny Craig" to "George Herriman, Italo Calvino, Brian Eno, and Tim Buckley" (Hart 2016, 8). This eclectic transmedial and intensely personal list suggests that the influences can also be understood as memories harbored by media and perpetuated through them, establishing unspoken but recognizable codes of representation and storytelling.

For Christy Mag Uidhir, "comics authorship is no queerer a thing than authorship of any other sort. The sort *comic* may well be a very queer thing indeed" (Uidhir 2005, 64) and consequently lends itself to queer readings that question the very boundaries of the medium and the use of words and images within it (Baetens 2011, 175). Queer readings might also be the means of understanding the collaborative authorship of comics through focusing on the fluid boundaries within creative teams behind comics in which various tasks often overlap. These fluid boundaries are also activated in the mediation of stories and narratives through comics as well as their publication and reading contexts, which in turn affect the construction of future comics as well as their creators.

## Paths Taken and to be Taken

The first three contributions in this special issue exemplify the study of authorship in English and French-language comics, thus providing insight into the two major linguistic contexts of Western comics production. All three offer finely tuned readings of the issues surrounding comics authorship: Benoît Glaude considers *Marzi*, the fictionalized and serialized autobiography of writer Marzena Sowa which is drawn—or illustrated—by Sylvain Savoia; Isabelle Licari-Guillaume studies the figuration of the *auteur* through the postures adopted by key Vertigo comics authors; Martin Flanagan delineates the impact of British writer Paul Cornell on the output of the American 'Big Two' publishers, DC and Marvel.

In keeping with their diverse subject matter, all three articles propose distinct ways of studying authorship in comics. Glaude considers the changing authorship of *Marzi* through its different publication formats, including strips and short stories in the magazine, *Spirou* and as a graphic novel translated in various languages which also impacted the presentation of *Marzi*'s authorship and the tension created between its partially autobiographical content and the paratext accompanying it through different contexts. Moreover, the problematic of self-representation as a child (which is nonetheless drawn by another's hand) as well as the figure of the author fluctuates according to publication context and readership. This is reflected in the content and positioning of the 'voice-over' which, for Glaude, "oscillates between an autodiegetic introspective voice to one of extradiegetic, retrospective commentary". Glaude's article on *Marzi* also engages with the many issues tied to the contrast between comics and graphic novels which is also at the core of Licari-Guillaume's examination of the (self-)presentation and collaborations of successful Vertigo authors such as Neil Gaiman and

Alan Moore. Flanagan continues in a similar direction but offer a different perspective by examining how British author Paul Cornell succeeded in adding a British flavor to superhero comics by Marvel and DC. In covering publishing contexts ranging from more avant-garde to less avant-garde ones, from the very distinct Vertigo imprint of DC Comics to the mechanisms of DC Comics and Marvel Comics in general, Licari-Guillaume and Flanagan highlight the many ways in which authorship is constructed or made manifest in keeping with specific editorial and publication demands. Licari-Guillaume does so through highlighting the ambiguity underlying the Vertigo authors' public and comic book postures as well as the biases of literary perspectives applied to comics. Flanagan on the other hand shows how the writer's influence and authority can be gleaned through tracking down recurrent themes and motifs across different publications and media.

These three articles are supplemented by graphic novelist Evi Tampold and her mother and publisher Carol Nash and Evi Tampold's illustrated article on the various forms or, to from Meizoz, 'postures' of authorship adopted by Evi in three single and co-authored graphic novels. While closely related to artistic practice-based research, exemplified in comics studies with Nick Sousanis' *Unflattening* as well as Simon Grennan's *A Theory of Narrative Drawing*. While Sousanis has highlighted the importance of engaging with the unique, hybrid nature of comics that allows readers to "breathe in worlds of image and text" (Sousanis 2015, 53), Grennan has also emphasized the advantages of using drawing to understand it: "the entire form of theoretical drawing communicates by making explicit the particular relationships between intentionality and alterity that the genre of theoretical text, as an agreed convention of research, does not" (Grennan 2015, 258). In visualizing themselves on the comics page and engaging with Evi's published drawings, Nash and Tampold's piece confronts us with the processes of storytelling and the shades of authorship involved in the creation of graphic memoirs.

To return to the macaque, there is a poignancy in Ella's toothy grin in spite of its playfulness, which stems from the relative directness and spontaneity of the photograph (since, all mediation and preparation aside, Slater had little control of Ella's position and pose). Comics drawing has a similar degree of potentially misleading directness as theorized by Marion's concept of graphiation. While graphic novels rely on a kind of (hyper-)individualized graphiation, the individualistic, subjective trace in mainstream comics is often more subdued or muffled, being discernible for only the most ardent of readers. The poignancy transmitted through these traces of authorial presence—to varying degrees informed by the artifice of self-construction involved in authorial posture—consequently fluctuates between two opposing poles in comics: that of the openly autobiographical memoir or the more constrained comics of the mainstream. However, as the articles in this issue show, comics authorship, which needs to be untangled from a vast web of competing interests, is often situated in-between the two idealized extremes of confessional autobiography and impersonal genre writing. It remains to be seen how comics authorship is figured in contexts and relationships that

still call for further exploration, such as, for instance, fanzines and the roles of unacknowledged hands (inkers, pencillers, colorers and others) as suggested at the beginning of this introduction.

If media authorship can be understood "as a site of cultural tension" (Johnson and Gray 2013, 10), then a deeper understanding of comics authorship will also provide clues regarding the sustaining—and constraining— of creative practices in other media ecologies and intermedial interactions (such as, for instance, adaptations). For comics, this implies combining insights from comics scholars, practitioners as well as agents involved in the publication and dissemination of comics. This issue, building on the findings of extant scholarship on authorship in comics and other media, hopes to provide incentive for further adventures into the (almost) unknown of comics authorship.

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